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# U.S.-China Relations: A Quick Q-and-A with Warren I. Cohen

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## U.S.-China Relations: A Quick Q-and-A with Warren I. Cohen

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February 5, 2010 in [Watching the China Watchers](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [Permalink](#)

By Jeffrey Wasserstrom

*While trying to keep up with the latest twists and turns of U.S.-China relations, something I recently wrote about for [Time magazine's Asian edition](#), I learned that a new edition of a book on the topic that I've learned a lot from, and also assigned in a recent undergraduate class, is about to come out from Columbia University Press. The book is Warren I. Cohen's [America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations](#), and this will be its fifth edition. Given the current interest in interactions and tensions between Washington and Beijing, I decided to ask Cohen (whose name should be familiar to many readers of this blog due to his books, his reviews and commentaries at [truthdig.com](#), as well as perhaps his contribution to a past China Beat feature on "[Presidential Reading Recommendations](#)") a few questions about this new edition—and previous incarnations of the volume.*

**Jeffrey Wasserstrom:** To begin with a brief history of the book, can you fill our readers in on when exactly you wrote the first edition and tell us some things about the state of U.S.-China relations was at the time?

**Warren I. Cohen:** I wrote the first edition 1969-70 while on sabbatical in Japan. It was published just before Kissinger's famous trip to Beijing. I had anticipated a change in policy because of the resumption of ambassadorial talks, easing of trade and travel restrictions, and Nixon's December 1970 remark that we had to have relations with Communist China, but the book was nonetheless dated weeks after it appeared.

**JW:** Looking back at the four times you revised it, what would you say was the revision that required the most dramatic updating?

**WIC:** Two things: 1) most obviously the rise of China to great power status. The last chapter of the new edition is titled "America in the Age of Chinese Power." 2) the emergence of democracy in Taiwan. I had lived there 1964-1966 and grew very hostile to the regime there. I never expected the political changes that came in the 1980s and had no qualms about the island reverting to Beijing's rule. I had to change my approach to the Taiwan issue, especially after the Tiananmen massacres.

**JW:** Obviously, if the new edition is about to hit bookstores, you must have finalized the new material in it some months ago. Do you feel good about the way you framed the current state of relations between the two countries, or is there anything you wish you could have known was going to happen between the time it went to proofs and today?

**WIC:** Again, I anticipated the direction the Obama administration would take. I've known Kurt Campbell, Jeff Bader, Derek Mitchell, et.al. for many years—and had a chance to talk about policy toward China and Taiwan with Secretary Clinton a couple of years ago. I also anticipated the stiffening of China's resistance to American pressures—and indicated my fear there was little we could do about it—and my concern that human rights issues might not get adequate attention.

**JW:** Is there any choice passage from a new part of the latest edition, whether in a "Preface" or "Epilogue," that you'd be willing to share with us as a teaser? Or perhaps a section from an earlier edition that still seems surprisingly up-to-date in light of recent developments?

**WIC:** Here are the concluding lines of the new edition: "Today, much as in the time of Theodore Roosevelt, American leaders want—and American interests require—a peaceful, prosperous, open, responsible, and cooperative China. The chances of China realizing these hopes are reasonably good, given the extent of shared interests and what are likely to be the primarily domestic concerns of both nations in the near term. Americans who study and work on Chinese-American affairs would also like to see a democratic and friendly China. They are not likely to see either in the foreseeable future. And in the early years of the new millennium most Americans are not so sure that a strong China is in their nation's interest."

